Photo by PH2 Daniel J. McLain

Semper Paratus?

By LCdr. Don Manning

Aviators must be prepared for any eventuality: emergencies, broken planes on man-up, weather, whatever. From day one of primary, our trusty IPs beat the concept of preparation into our heads, either in flight or by covering many "what ifs" during the extensive briefs. How many junior aviators fully appreciate proper preparation? How many of us still think this way after 1,000 hours? If you are standing an overnight alert, do you mentally prepare yourself as if you were going to fly it?

During JTFEX for my third JO deployment, I woke up with the det OinC kicking my rack and yelling at me to wake up for a flight. A quick check of the clock showed 0200, and the realization sunk in that our alert-60 mission actually was being launched. How often does this happen in the HSL community?

While the troopers traversed the aircraft onto the flight deck, my 2P and I went to CIC to see what was up. CIC briefed that a *Spruance*-class destroyer, 60 miles away, had a subsurface contact. However, a P-3 told them the contact was a wreck or rock formation, not a sub. We were to be the tiebreaker.

I was in the right seat, allowing the H2P to get quality ATO training. After checking in with the DD, we coordinated airspace with the P-3 and got their buoy dope; our assessment agreed with the P-3. It was approaching 0430 as we started home. After we started climbing, the TACAN showed mom and our racks 58 miles away. As I gave the H2P the controls, so he could fly for a while, a master-caution light lit up our faces. At the same time, we got a right engine chip light. The chip light went out after five seconds.

No secondaries were noted as I mentally juggled the ORM issues. "Hmmmm," I figured, "Mom is 58 miles away, but this DD I'm talking to only is 12 miles behind me."

I called the DD, requested flight quarters, took back the controls, and turned around. My guess was fuzz caused the master-caution light; the DD's mechs would clean it up, and we'd be on the way back to our racks.

You see where this is going, right?

I flew a poor, single-engine (just in case the engine quit) approach to a landing, and the right engine worked like a champ. I got out after we shut down and left the H2P to supervise the APU. While I talked with the local det's maintenance chief, their night-check AD came into the hangar with the chip detector asking, "Was that thing running when you landed?"

"Uh, yes, it was fine," I replied.

"Well, look at this," he said, holding out the chip detector. The filter screen was full of metal; the pieces were big, small, different colors, and some had serial numbers. A sample of every kind of metal in the engine was there, and I knew this sign was not good for my anticipated reunion with my rack.

The DD had two helos in the hangar, so there was no way for us to change an engine on board. After spending the morning considering the options, our battle-group staff decided to detach the ship from the exercise, go to Norfolk, and crane us off.

As the DD's air det hooked us up with racks, it was time for a crew-gear inventory. I was the only one of the three of us who had a wallet, ID card, credit card or cash ($29 to be exact), and we were headed to Norfolk for an unknown length of time. The DD's air-det was awesome, hooking us up with toiletries and newly purchased underwear from the ship's store.

Our home squadron arranged for the crane-off and sent a rescue det from Mayport. Day four of our alert launch saw the rescue detachment installing our engine, with the help of the local HCS squadron (I never could thank those guys enough).

Days five and six saw us repeatedly FCF the aircraft. I was the det MO and, fortunately, was FCF qualified. We finally got the profile out without a chip-light (from the factory-new engine) on the sixth try.

Woohoo. On day seven, we were out of there. Norfolk is fine, and I saw a bunch of friends, but the three of us really wanted to get back to our favorite toothbrushes. I got a rough idea where the boat was from the home squadron but couldn't raise the ship on the pots line to talk to the OinC. I queried the crew, and we decided that, because the weather was OK for now (forecasted to get worse), we should reposition to Cherry Point and call from there. At least, we would be closer and could move (before the weather) when we got in touch with the boat.

After an uneventful flight to Cherry Point, I got through on the phone to the boat. The plan was to use a CG, which was halfway, as a communications-relay lily pad. Our FFG was beyond our shore-to-ship SOP distance. The CG was expecting us to check in, make a quick call to our squadron CO for a "sounds good to me" approval, and then go. By now, the weather was scattered T-storms everywhere and looking worse by the minute.

During man-up, we noticed a lot of air-wing jets had bingoed into Cherry Point because of the weather. Hmmmm. Well, we're helo guys with radar, and the boss said the weather at the ship was OK. Heck with it, we're going!

Most of the flight was spent working the radar to avoid the continually deteriorating weather. The CG lily pad/communications guard worked great, and we pressed on to mom.

Mom's weather was bad, I mean really bad, as in the sky-sea-boat-all-the-same-color kind of bad. We started a TACAN approach, and I saw the wake at one-quarter mile. We broke out the centerline strobes soon thereafter. The H2P was flying and saw nothing. I talked him into a hover over the deck; he finally saw the boat and completed a safe landing. The OinC was glad to see us back.

Lessons from this adventure were many. If you are standing an alert, be well-rested and prepared to fly. An alert launch was so infrequent for us that we thought nothing of staying up until the end of movie time, then hitting the Play Station for two hours. I was tired throughout the flight, and I'm sure my poorly flown, single-engine approach was a result. Being tired also didn't help my people skills five hours later when trying to squash the unrealistic plans.

Ease of maintenance never should decide where you land. With no secondary indications and an extinguished chip light, a case could be made for flying to mom. In this case, though, the whole A bearing on the motor had disintegrated, but it continued to run fine. How long would it have worked? My decision resulted in a painful seven-day adventure; it was the right decision.

We now are huge believers in the piloting adage, "Never separate yourself from your underwear, or your wallet." As an HSL crew, we couldn't have fathomed ever ending up in Norfolk for four days. Fortunately, I like to fly with my wallet, and soda money is nice to have if you get gas on another boat. We would have been out of luck had I left it behind.

Don't let yourself get pressured by the heavies into doing something unsafe. The DesRon's plan was to have the DD go alongside mom; then we'd fly the helo over single-engine. The DD skipper was all aboard with this plan and even started driving the ship that way. But, his air det OinC and I thought it wasn't a great idea to brief the CO that I was not enthused with the plan. Our OinC coordinated with the DesRon to turn it off. Everyone laughs at these scenarios during HAC boards, but they do happen.

Last, have you ever heard of get-to-the-boat-itis? This is when you realize it is so painful to stay on the beach until a better time, because of maintenance or maybe weather, that you just go for it. I had many clues the weather was poor but figured because these workups were for my third cruise and second as a HAC I could handle it. Nobody in my crew said a word. I think I run a relaxed cockpit environment, but I did not exactly solicit go/no-go opinions, either. It worked out OK, but I found out later I had scared the H2P. We should have waited until later in the day when the temperatures cooled down and the T-storms had started to dissipate.

LCdr. Manning flies with VAW-117.

Semper Paratus—translation, Always Prepared—Ed.